DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 444 HE 035 948

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TITLE	A Qualitative Study of African American Student Persistence in a Private Black College.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	29p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Persistence; Black Colleges; *Black Students; *College Students; *Educational Environment; Higher Education; Private Colleges; Qualitative Research; *School Holding Power; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This study addressed a void in the current literature by identifying and describing positive and negative influences on the persistence in school of African American students attending a private black college (PBC). Four students participated in the study: four males and one female. There were six formal interviews in all, with each subject participating in at least one interview. Findings suggest that African American student persistence is most greatly affected by student experiences and the interactions that occur within the PBC environment or are facilitated by the PBC environment. One of the major socializing agents on PBC campuses is the faculty/staff. Being involved in campus life is also an integral part of African American student persistence. The two factors that most negatively impacted persistence were the physical appearance of the campus and the living conditions of the students. Although the PBC environment cannot be duplicated easily at larger, predominantly white institutions, persistence can be enhanced by taking into account the importance of relationships and participation. (Contains 38 references.) (SLD)

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A Qualitative Study of African American Student Persistence In a Private Black College

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2003 AERA Annual Meeting
Session Title: College Students' Identity and Cognitive Development

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A Qualitative Study of African American Student Persistence in a Private Black College

There is an abundance of research that examines the development and persistence of college students. However, there is only a small portion of it that specifically examines the persistence of African American college students. Prior to the 1970's African Americans were virtually ignored in college student persistence literature. There are several major reasons for this exclusion. Foremost is the fact that African Americans had only recently gained access to mainstream higher education because for the majority of its existence this system had been divided along racial lines (Brown II, 1999). Whites were educated in a system that evolved around their needs and reflected their culture and values, while African Americans were educated in their own system. Secondly, African Americans only made up a small percentage of the student body at Predominantly White Institutions. The studies conducted within them did not specifically examine the experiences of the minority groups, so even if African Americans were included their opinions would be poorly represented in the findings.

In the last three decades research examining African American student persistence has increased significantly, but much of it is based on models or tests the applicability of models developed from white students in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Pascarella & Terenzinni, 1991; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The applicability of these theories and models should be questioned when applied to minority groups even within the same institutions (Pascarella & Terenzinni, 1991). If the relevance of these theories to African American students is questionable within the same institution, then surely it is between institutions that are oriented towards different students. In one of the few studies conducted on the topic Desousa and Kuh (1996) found that their model of African American student attrition developed at the predominantly white University of Indiana did not fit African American students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). They suggested that research conducted at similar institutions might be transferable in many ways, but that research done between institutions with educational environments so different is problematic to say the least.

African American students attending Private Black Colleges (PBCs) may be the least represented in persistence literature. PBCs represent more than one half of all HBCUs, send a large proportion of their graduates on to graduate and professional schools, and represent a unique set of educational environments. Still they have not been explored in the effort to more thoroughly understand the persistence process among African American students.

This study addressed the void in current literature by identifying and describing the positive and negative influences on the persistence of African American students attending a PBC. Because this study was specifically designed to address a student's voluntary decision to remain in college rather than the college's attempt to retain students, the word persistence was used instead of retention. The information gathered in this study was used to develop a model of persistence for African American students in Private Black Colleges that aids in explaining the relationships between the student, environment, and factors that influence persistence.

Theoretical Background

Evolution of Attrition and Retention Literature

Descriptive Studies

In its earliest stage attrition research was primarily descriptive. It told which students were most likely to drop out of college and when they were most likely to drop out by making empirical generalizations about the characteristics of students that do not remain in college until graduation. These descriptive attrition studies were responsible for compiling large amounts of demographic data about students that drop out of college (Bean, 1982).

The major weakness of this type of research is that it does not attempt to explain why students possessing certain characteristics are more likely to drop out. Descriptive research is designed to show correlations between variables rather than causation. John P. Bean (1982) refers to this early form of attrition research as atheoretical because there is no rationale attempting to explain why variables or student characteristics are linked in certain ways. However, this type of research laid the foundation for future attrition research by providing hard data for researchers to draw inferences from.

Predictive Studies

In the late 1950's and early 1960's attrition research began to evolve from being primarily descriptive to being predictive in nature. This predictive approach sought to identify factors that would aid in predicting which students would stay or leave college. The vast majority of this research focused on pre-collegiate factors that generally fell into these three major categories academic, demographic, or financial (Bean, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This type of research was important to college personnel during this era because it told them who was most likely to succeed or not succeed, thereby allowing colleges to set their admissions standards accordingly.

This form of research shares the same weakness as its immediate predecessor (descriptive research). Even though it aids in identifying the type of student that would be successful, it does not explain why some students possessing similar or dissimilar characteristics remain while others do not (Bean, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). An explanation for this occurrence may be that this type of research came about during an era when more emphasis was being placed on whom should be admitted to college than what occurs after entry.

The 1950's and 60's marked a time when people of different races and classes were attempting to gain access to a system of higher education that traditionally served a largely demographically and financially homogenous group of people. The descriptive research of that time largely showed that nontraditional students (poor and minorities) were less successful as a whole than their traditional counterparts; while predictive research placed the emphasis solely on the potential student. It examined the student's background characteristics to determine if they were likely to stay and thereby be worthy of the investment of the institution's resources. It did so wit'.out examining the role of the institution itself in the attrition/retention process.

As higher education became more diverse during the 60's and 70's nontraditional students continued to have higher attrition rates than the traditional ones (Astin, 1982).

This recurring pattern in part led to research attempting to explain why some students dropout when others do not. In the early 1970's Rootman developed his Person-Role Fit Model. It expanded upon predictive literature by acknowledging that there is some interaction between the individual and the institution. The basic premise of Rootman's model is that the better the fit between the person and the what is required of that person within an institution the more likely the person is to become highly integrated (Bean, 1982; Rootman, 1972). Even though this model helped to move attrition research more towards a focus on the interaction between students and their college environments, like its predecessors the outcomes of studies using this model were primarily used to provide information about what type of student should be admitted. Other models being developed around this time took Rootman's basic premise, that the higher the level of similarity between student characteristics and student role the more likely a student is to stay, to another level by attempting to more thoroughly explain the process whereby student come to leave (Bean, 1982). These models would come to be known as the Longitudinal Process Models.

Longitudinal Process Models

Longitudinal Process Models are those that study the attrition process over a period of time. They may also be referred to a College Impact Models (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). They differ from descriptive and predictive research because they take into account pre-collegiate characteristics of students, but they primarily focus on what occurs while a student is matriculating through college (Tinto 1993, Bean 1982, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

In 1970 Spady developed the first full-blown theoretical model of the dropout process. He identified background characteristics such as family, academic potential, ability, and socio-economic status as being important in the decision to drop out; however these factors alone did not serve as the basis for his model. In his model shared group values and support from friends while in college were also key determinants in a student's decision to remain in college. According to his model all of these factors come together to lead to greater social integration. This in turn is expected to increase satisfaction, thereby increasing the institutional commitment of the student to the college. According to Spady's model (and later ones as well) institutional commitment is the direct antecedent of dropout (Bean, 1982).

The most popular and widely cited of the Longitudinal Process Models was developed by Vincent Tinto (Bean, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). It recognizes that individual characteristics play a substantial role in the decision to leave, but it argues that this role cannot be understood without reference to the intellectual and social context of the institution. It further argues that the institution is transformative in nature, meaning that the experiences one has within it continually modify the individual/ institutional dynamic.

Tinto's model argues that student's experiences heavily correlate with the decision to stay or leave. Positive integrative experiences raise institutional commitment while negative ones lower it. Also the experiences of an individual within formal institutional settings may affect informal or vice versa (Tinto, 1993).

Student Involvement Theory

The roots of Student Involvement Theory lie in the Longitudinal Study of College Dropouts. According to Astin (1984) virtually every factor identified in longitudinal attrition literature that significantly affects college student's persistence can be rationalized in terms of involvement. Astin defines involvement in this manner, "Quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (p. 297)". Astin felt that involvement manifests itself in the actions of the students, so it is not so much what the individual thinks or feels but his behavior that identifies involvement. Astin (1984) states,

> .... a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, a typical uninvolved student neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students (297 – 298).

Astin sees the institutional environment as providing students with a variety of opportunities for change and encounter. The amount of change or "growth" by the student depends upon the extent that the student becomes involved (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991; Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

African Americans in Higher Education

For the vast majority of our nation's history its system of higher education has been segregated along racial lines. Masses of African Americans were restricted by law or common practice from receiving a minimal amount of education, much less the opportunity to attend a college before the Civil War. Prior to 1860 there were only twenty-eight acknowledged African Americans that were able to overcome racial and educational barriers to obtain a baccalaureate degree from an American college (Harris III, Figgures, and Carter, 1975; Thompson, 1973).

For nearly a century HBCUs served as the only viable higher educational option for African American students. 1954, however, marked major change for the future of the African American student. The Supreme Court case of Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) ruled that "separate but equal" was unconstitutional (Brown II, 1999). Despite the fact it was a primary and secondary educational ruling, it set precedence for later legislation on higher education and helped to spark integration attempts of Southern PWIs by African American students and civil rights activists.

These early desegregation efforts served as a precursor to present debates on African American student experiences in higher education. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 continued the desegregation process for African American students. It stated that no person should be excluded, denied, or subjected to discrimination based on race/ethnicity under any program receiving federal funds (Brown II, 1999). The Act was enforced by the threat of denial and withdrawal of federal funds from any institution that did not comply. The effects of desegregation efforts could be clearly seen in Higher

Education by the 1970s. The majority of African American students were no longer educated in HBCUs. By the mid 1970s more than three-quarters of all African American college students attended PWIs (Hall & Allen, 1989).

The shift in enrollment patterns of African American college students heightened interest in their experiences at PWIs. Research (Fleming, 1985; Garibaldi, 1984; Gosman, Dandridge, Nettles, & Theony, 1983; Harris III, Figgures, & Carter, 1975; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Smith, 1981) revealed that even though African American enrollment was climbing to new heights, graduation was not. Alexander Astin (1982) estimated that African American student completion rates were approximately a third of white students. This phenomena lead to research that began to focus on the factors that contribute to racial differences in college dropout rates (Hall & Allen, 1989). The bulk of studies on black college students fall in this category.

Gosman, Dandridge, Nettles, and Thoeny (1983) studied the influence of race, student, and institutional characteristics on student progression. They found that significant differences existed between African American and white student cohorts in terms of attrition and graduation rates. Furthermore, they stated that evidence existed that the racial compositions of the institutions that students attend affects attrition, progression pattern, and the relationship between race and performance. Gosman, Dandridge, Nettles, and Thoeny stated their findings in this manner, "Specifically we found that the underrepresented racial group at both predominantly white and predominantly black universities had higher mean attrition rates than the majority group and was less likely to follow the prescribed progression patterns"(p.222). Nettles' (1983) study involving African American and white students at thirty private and public institutions echoed these findings. Nettles found that regardless of race students in the racial minority group felt discriminated against on campus and they performed worse in terms of progression and GPA.

These findings are aligned with those of many other researchers that have concluded that a "lack of fit" between African American students and PWIs largely explains the difference in attrition rates (Hall & Allen, 1989). The "college fit" concept is very similar to Rootman's basic premise that the better the fit between the person and what is required of that person in an institution the more likely they are to become highly integrated. According to "college fit" the greater the congruence between students' goals, values, and attitudes and those of the colleges that they attend the greater the probability of successful performance in terms of persistence and achievement (Jones, Pascarella & Terezini, Pfeifer). Many African American scholars also agree with the college fit concept as a partial explanation for the differential patterns of college success that exist between African American and white students. Adair (1984) states that the white school environment largely reflects the culture and heritage of the dominant group forcing African Americans to cope with an alien experience. Also, alienation and lack of environmental support emerge repeatedly as predictors of attrition in research related to African American students (Davis, 1994; Desousa & Kuh, 1996; Fleming, 1985; Trippi & Baker, 1989).

Private Black Colleges

When the first Black Colleges were founded ninety percent of African Americans lived in rural southern communities. The vast majority of this population was illiterate. Black colleges were created to address the needs of these people and to educate them. These institutions were called colleges and universities, but in reality they were responsible for education African Americans at all levels. African American church related colleges, American Missionary Association (AMA) supported, and other private organizations assumed much of the major responsibility for reducing illiteracy and for the training of preachers, teachers, leaders and other professionals (Thompson, 1973).

Private black colleges share a lot of characteristics. One of the most pervasive seems to be that they are poorly funded. This often shows in their physical plant and resources for students (Thompson, 1973). In 1967 Christopher Jencks and David Riesman published an article on the role of American Negro Colleges which criticized much of what occurs within them. Jencks and Riesman (1967) found that these colleges were ill financed, ill staffed, and were almost never academically selective by white standards. They recruited students with limited academic promise and placed modest academic demands on them. Based on this they concluded that the majority of Negro Colleges were academically inferior institutions modeled after white ones. They felt that African American college graduates would be at a disadvantage and that they would not grow to be significantly racially diverse in the future because white students and faculty would not be inclined to go there (Jencks and Riesman, 1967).

Educators involved with HBCUs or teaching at them offer a different perspective. Although they tend to acknowledge the financial problems of many Black colleges they vehemently disagree with the assessment that Black colleges are academically inferior or modeled after white colleges. Private Black colleges have remained true to their original purpose, the upliftment of African American people in spite of financial situations and funding barriers. Research (De Sousa & Kuh, 1996) has concluded that these colleges provide richer learning environments for African Americans and that their students devote more effort to academic activities.

Another characteristic PBCs share is their small size. Most of them average less than three thousand students. African American educators site this as a strength. Thompson (1973) states, "They believe that students in small colleges will ordinarily have the best opportunities to develop positive self-identities, establish meaningful personal relationships with teachers, and acquire the skills and attitudes necessary to become socially conscious leaders"(p.37).

Early black colleges also set a pattern of admissions that still exists today to some extinct. Since black colleges were created to educate a race of people that were largely illiterate after slavery, they had a responsibility of educating the masses. In keeping with this responsibility throughout history they have tended to accept students with little regard to their class or high school record (Willie & Edmonds, 1978). Calvert H. Smith (1981) states that:

> Traditionally, predominantly black institutions have educated the spectrum of talented and untalented students. Whatever the pool of black students

> created by society, predominantly black institutions worked with them all.... Through the commitment and creativity of these institutions, they developed a capacity to provide a broad range of academic experiences to challenge each category of student, to facilitate their growth and to satisfy their educational needs (p. 5).

Black colleges' flexible admissions practices and academic standards were unprecedented in U. S. higher education (Willie and Edmonds, 1978). The practices and standards reflected a commitment of black colleges to the African American community and the goal of racial uplift. According to Willie (1983) "Blacks have been taught in their institutions that the greatest of all is first a servant of all (p.9)." This means that personal success is of limited advantage if is not used to benefit others.

There is no encompassing definition of what a nurturing environment for the education of African American students entails, but Black colleges often stress their orientation towards the African American experience. James Banks (1993) observes that the most productive environment for learning is one that is consistent with the student's culture and experiences. Seeing reflections of themselves such as pictures on the wall, faculty/staff, leaders, and other students helps minorities feel as if they are a part of or have an invested interest in the campus life. Positive reinforcers such as this often motivate students and affirm their sense of self-worth. Beverly Tatum (1997) believes that stereotypes, omissions, and distortions may cause African Americans to begin to value the role models, lifestyles, and images of the dominant group more so than their own. On the contrary, in environments where people actively seek to encourage positive racial identity by providing students with positive cultural images and messages of being Black the impact of dominant societies' messages is reduced (Tatum, 1997). James Earl Davis (1994) performed a study that supports this argument. One of the major threads of this study was to examine perceived social support and its contribution to student achievement between African American males at HBCUs and PWIs. He found that "the black males attending black colleges were integrated into the academic life of campus, got better grades, and perceived their colleges as providing more institutional support (p.627)."

Methods

Site Selection

Two Rivers College is a Private Historically Black College located on the northern edge of a southern capital city. It has a population of approximately 1000 students. Nearly all of them are African American. Fifty-five percent of the students live on campus. The other forty-five percent commute. The student to faculty ratio within Two Rivers College is 12 to 1. Sixty-two percent of their classes have 20 students or less. It has a seventy-eight percent freshman retention rate and a sixty-six percent five-year graduation rate. Approximately seventy percent of Two Rivers College's graduates pursue further study in graduate or professional schools within one year of attaining their undergraduate degrees (US News.com, 2002).

Two Rivers College was selected as the site for this study for a variety of reasons. Foremost is its designation as a Private Black College. An above average rate of African American student retention and graduation, its small campus size, and small student enrollment also contributed to its selection. Retention literature (Astin, 1982, Tinto1987) states that small, private colleges tend to maintain higher rates of retention among the campuses' majority race population. Two Rivers College was chosen because it meets each of the aforementioned qualifications.

Sample Selection

The participants in this study were identified by recommendations from faculty/administration and from student observations. Four persons were selected to participate in this study. There were three African American males and one African American female. Of the three male participants two were graduating seniors and one was a sophomore. The female student was also a sophomore.

I used a network sampling technique in this study. I selected my first subject based off of recommendations from an administrator at Two Rivers College. The administrator was not notified of which student was selected to participate. The remaining three were selected based off of observations, conversations with students, and the subjects meeting criteria for inclusion in the study. My use of network sampling was designed to maximize discovery by identifying participants with differences in their backgrounds, interests, and involvement.

Data Collection & Analysis

The study consisted of formal and informal interviews/observations with the four participants. The observations involved my observing on campus activities and participants in agreed upon settings. The observations were accompanied by informal interviews for further clarification. All of the informal interviews were open-ended and unstructured.

There were six formal interviews in all. Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and fifteen minutes. Each subject participated in at least one formal interview. Two of the subjects participated in a follow-up interview. The formal interviews took place at different on-campus locations as agreed upon by the participants prior to the interview. The formal interviews involved face-to-face dialogue, audiotaping, and extensive note taking.

Interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed using a constant comparative method of coding as defined by Miles & Huberman (1994). This form of analysis required developing an open coding system that could be allocated to words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs to aid in data analysis. Miles & Huberman (1994) define codes in this manner, "Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study"(p.56). Data collection and analysis took place simultaneously. Transcribing interviews, writing memos, coding, and creating displays all helped to sharpen and focus the understanding of the researcher.

Findings

The findings used the experiences and stories of four Two Rivers College students Dave, Kurt, Corey, and Renee to address the two following questions:

1. What are the major factors that have assisted/hindered African American student persistence within Two Rivers College?
2. How do these factors influence African American college students to remain/not remain at this college?

Six major factors in Two Rivers College students' persistence were identified and examined in detail. They were the physical appearance of the campus, living conditions, student/faculty relationships, school influence/culture, student involvement, and the impracticality of transferring. This section explains the relationships between the factors as well as their affect on Two Rivers College students' persistence using *Latiker's Model of African American Student Persistence in a Private Black College* that was developed based upon a synthesis of the data gathered from the four subjects in this study.

Physical Appearance / Facilities

For most Two Rivers College students the physical appearance of the campus serves as an obstacle to persistence, at least initially. Two Rivers College's campus was built on an old plantation where the large antebellum plantation house still remains. The one pothole filled road that runs through the entire campus is partially lined by large oak trees with Spanish Moss hanging from the limbs and leads directly past a large antebellum home. Two Rivers College has a number of other buildings constructed in the 1800's or early 1900's that are mixed with architecture from more modern eras leaving the physical plant lacking uniformity. One student described his first impression of the school as a mixture between some backwoods type place and a campus beginning to look like a Millhaven (nearby Private Predominantly White College). Corey (Two Rivers College senior) stated, "What really caught me when I got her was the trees, the moss trees. All the moss was hanging from the trees. That's what really got me weary about the school." Corey further stated, " I am kind of glad that I didn't (see the campus) because if I would have, I probably would not have come." The negative first impression that many students often get is reinforced when they see or visit other colleges with more developed physical plants. Students support this claim with statements such as, "Because I had already visited JSU and Alcorn (HBCUs in Mississippi) and other colleges out of state their college campuses made Two Rivers College look more like a high school than a college campus."

Exposure to Two Rivers College and other college campuses, however, does not affect all students negatively or in the same manner. Renee (sophomore) grew up near Two Rivers College and had seen the campus many times. When I asked her for her opinion on the campus she responded in this manner, " (Laughs) OK, when I first got to Two Rivers College I had to look at it from the artist's point of view. OK, it has a nice

atmosphere with the trees and the moss. It has a nice homey feeling because it is so small and all this other stuff." Renee was able to view this campus in a different light than the other subjects that were interviewed. Perhaps this is because her prior exposure to the campus eliminated the initial shock of seeing the campus for the first time.

Learning the history of the college and time seem to be the two most significant factors in changing students' impression of the campus appearance. It seems that over time students begin to learn more about the history of their college and its various buildings. This helps them to develop an appreciation and understanding for the look of the campus. Learning the history of the college enables students to notice more and put what they see into context. Students become able affectionately refer to the antebellum house as "The Mansion." The moss-covered trees no longer make students weary or apprehensive of the campus, but they provide a connection to the past. Corey describes the transformation that students go through in this manner, "Once you learn the history of Two Rivers College you basically understand why the buildings are still up such as the Mansion and the significance of the chapel. So, once you learn the history of the college you kind of look over the physical appearance."

Time affects students' appreciation of the physical appearance of the campus in more ways than just providing students with opportunities to learn about the college's history. Time affords students with the opportunity to develop a routine and be influenced by a number of the factors within the college setting. Dave describes the process in this manner, "I'm not going to lie, when I first came here I was like I don't want to go here. I am going to transfer! It kind of grows on you. You get used to it. You start getting used to walking down Renner (male dorm), getting used to all of this stuff. It's like a fungus, you can't get rid of it!"

Living Conditions

Even with the appreciation of the physical appearance of the campus, which may either be there initially or developed over time, there is another closely related factor in the persistence puzzle. This factor is the living conditions. Like the physical appearance, many students may initially frown upon the living conditions. When asked what if anything has made you think about leaving this college, Kurt (Two Rivers College senior) responded, "Basically the living conditions and the food in the cafeteria. Those were the main two reasons."

Kurt lived in Renner Hall, the only male dorm on campus, his first four years in college. His sentiment about the living conditions was shared by all of the males in the study. Dave described his feelings about the dorms in this manner, "When I walked into Renner Hall and I saw my room and realized that I have to live here with another fella, I was like I can't live like this." The male dorm, Renner Hall, was built in 1972 and is a two story, 200 capacity structure that has five "houses." Each of these houses consists of twenty student rooms, a counselor's apartment, two lounges, and two baths. The major problem that students have with this structure is the incredibly small size of the rooms. The rooms are just long enough to fit two undersized twin beds together and wide enough for 1 twin sized bed and a small trunk. Male students complain that once the two portable closets and small desk are added (standard with the rooms) there is barely room for two people to get in and out of their rooms.

Living conditions, however, do not appear to be a negative factor for female students. When Renee was asked about her living conditions she quickly and excitedly responded, "I stay in a brand spankin' new dorm!" A male student, Corey, had this to say about the dorm situation, "With the dorm situation you have three female dorms and one male dorm. We just got a brand new female dorm, three stories! Then we have another female (dorm) which is pretty nice, but with the male dorm it is horrible. You know we have ceilings leaking, you have doors messed up and it is just the fact that no one seems to care about the guys at times."

School Influence / Culture

The influence of Two Rivers College on its students' persistence can be attributed to more than the physical attributes of the campus. Two Rivers' influence is largely mediated by the culture of the institution. Two Rivers is oriented around African American traditions and norms, but its culture goes beyond that. Two Rivers has developed its own influences and terminology for enculturating its students based on its unique history, the influence of its people, and its location. The two that have been identified as having the most profound effect upon the persistence of its students are cultural relevance and the phenomenon within Two Rivers College known simply as "giving back."

Cultural Relevance

Students view Two Rivers as being culturally relevant because much of what goes on within its gates is centered on African American interest and issues. The subjects of this study and other students reported that the campus environment is largely centered around their interests, making the college experience feel more positive. Dave stated, "I think that I have a better chance of getting in touch with myself. Being around people who are more like you, from the same background as you kind of really gets you to see yourself in a way."

Assemblies such as Chapel and classes like Mission Involvement are also responsible for immersing students within the African American culture. Chapel is an assembly that is held weekly at 10:00 A.M. All campus offices close from 10 A.M. to 11 A.M. each time Chapel is held. Faculty/staff, administration, students, and sometimes guest speakers or community members gather for ceremonies or to discuss certain issues. Renee describes it in this way, "It is not chapel like you are going to church. They have a speaker come in with a different message every week." Although Renee stated that it is not like church, chapel does tend to have both a cultural and religious overtone to it.

Three things stood out to me during my observations of Chapel. First was an emphasis on religion with the inclusion of prayer and gospel songs. Second and seemingly the most stressed was pride in the history and accomplishments of the school and its graduates. The third was that an emphasis was placed on African American culture. African drums were used during the ceremonies and students often spoke of the successes of their people.

Students also report that their classes are often centered around issues that affect the African American community. This has especially been true for Mission Involvement. Mission Involvement is a freshmen orientation class. It is different from

most orientation classes because of the length of time that students have to take it and the content of the course. Renee said this about Mission Involvement,

> Mission Involvement is like a year long class that is supposed to get freshmen oriented with Two Rivers and teaches you different skills that you are going to need to get through college. It is a yearlong orientation where most schools give you a week of orientation and that is it...no, Two Rivers gives you a year and gives you a grade for it.

Giving Back

Proponents of black colleges state that black colleges have traditionally shouldered much of the responsibility of uplifting the African American race, causing a sense of duty to become ingrained within the very culture of these institutions (Gray, 1997). These colleges teach their students that they also have a responsibility to uplift African Americans. This phenomenon is clearly evident at Two Rivers College. Those involved with this college have created their own label for their responsibility and perhaps may have taken it a step further. At Two Rivers College this responsibility is simply known as "giving back."

When Dave was asked if there was anything that this college really stressed to its students he immediately responded in this manner,

> Giving back...from the time that I came to Two Rivers College the whole thing was that you get your education from Two Rivers College so that you can give back. If not to Two Rivers College then to your community. It was like even from the financial point of view. You go out, get your career and make money so that you can give back to Two Rivers College. If you are in education you go out and get your degree and get your experience so that you can come back and teach at Two Rivers College. And go out and get community service. Sixty hours of community service giving back to the community. Its all about...that's what I get from it.

Just as Dave describes, "giving back" is a theme that permeates throughout the entire institution. Students are taught both overtly and covertly that they have a responsibility to Two Rivers College, the community, and to their fellow students.

Two Rivers College's commitment to giving back to the community is most clearly evident in their community service requirement. All Two Rivers College graduates must clock a minimum of 60 hours of community service in order to graduate. The handbook outlines the rules of the service in this manner.

> Such services shall be rendered after the sophomore year and may be in any social agency or organization which seeks to serve the social needs of the community and which have been approved by the College. Projects may be done at any point in the school year or summer but must be done under the mentorship of an approved person who will certify and evaluate the service. Service shall not be done for pay; although some social

agencies might assist students with the cost of transportation and other expenses associated with the task. (p.56)

Students must also write an essay about their experiences and its benefits. They do not receive a grade or any credit hours for their service, but their completion of the project is recorded on the transcript. Not receiving a grade, credit, or monetary compensation sends the message to students that giving back is done without expecting anything in return. Each of the four participants had taken part in some form of community service even though two of them had not completed their sophomore year. This means that the two sophomores did community service even though they would not receive credit for it.

Student & Faculty/Staff Relationships

When asked what factors have been most influential in your decision to remain in this college half of the subjects immediately responded that was their relationship with members of the faculty and staff. The ones that did not mention it as being most influential still spoke repeatedly about their relationships with professors throughout their interviews. They even provided some of the more powerful examples of faculty influence on their college experience. It was found that faculty fill one or a combination of three fundamental roles in their relationships with students that influence their persistence. The roles were teacher (in-class), mother/father figure (out of class), and mentor/advisor (out of class).

Teachers at Two Rivers influence persistence by creating an in-class learning environment that is relevant to the needs of the student. James Banks (1993) states that the most productive environment for learning is one that is consistent with the student's culture and experiences. Teachers within Two Rivers provide this type of environment by orienting their classes toward African American history and culture. Renee said this about her teachers at Two Rivers, "I can say for my teachers, whatever we are learning about there is going to be something in there based on some part of African history or African American Culture."

The sharing of personal experiences by the teachers in the classroom is also highly valued by the students. It provides a level of concreteness for the students and helps them to see commonalties between themselves and the teachers. This further increases the teacher's credibility by helping students see that their teachers are not out of touch with real life experiences. Kurt states that, "If you go through something and can tell me about it then I will listen...If you are from the outside looking in it's like a whole different outlook. One, I may not respect everything that you are saying. Two, I may feel that you really don't understand what it was, the struggle, that we had to go through as a people." Kurt further goes on to say that students can identify when teachers are out of touch with real-life issues especially those relating to African American culture by the way that they describe it.

Another trait shared among teachers that students valued was that they stressed that they were accessible to students. According to students those teachers that they were closest to made it known that they were available in class, during office hours, or even walking across the yard. Renee says, "Yea, I feel free to talk to my professors. If I see

them out walking across the yard or if I just feel like dropping by their offices and hugging them just because I can."

Even though what occurs between faculty and students within class is significant, students are most heavily influenced by contact with faculty outside of class. When asked to describe their relationship with faculty each of the participants described their relationship with at least one professor as being atypical of the average student/teacher relationship because of the degree of closeness in their relationships. Corey described two members of the faculty as mother and father figures for him. Corey stated that he had a good relationship with Dr. Andrews, who was the Dean of the Education Department but is now the acting Provost of the college. He highly respects this professor and describes their relationship in this manner,

> I can describe it as "tough love" because if we see each other on the street it is like 'how are you doing Dr. Andrews and you know we give each other a hug or whatever, but when it comes down to a professional level or I have to go to her she is going to tell me what I have to do. It is not sugar coating or anything. Basically it is like your mother. Your mother is not going to tell you what you want to hear. She is going to tell you the truth and that is how Dr. Andrews is towards me.

This relationship has helped Corey get more involved in campus life and the surrounding community.

Faculty/staff may also fill the role of advisor/mentor to students. This role can be official or unofficial. This means that the faculty/staff member filling that role can be either school appointed (a major advisor), someone that has agreed to serve as an advisor/mentor on certain projects, or the relationship may simply evolve from encounters between faculty/staff and students on campus.

Beyond individual personalities the relationships between students and faculty/staff are most heavily affected by the following factors: the frequency of out-of-class contact, the major of the student, the length of time that the student has attended college, and the student's involvement in campus activities/organizations. Each of these factors work together to have a cumulative affect on the relationship. Generally, the greater the amount of each factor the more positively the student views the relationship.

The length of time that a student has attended the college also has a great affect on the relationship because it evolves over time. Initially a student may dislike or not appreciate a professor because of a negative experience, but prolonged contact between the two may alter these feelings. Kurt illustrated this point well when he described his relationship with his favorite teacher,

> At first it was kind of hard to like her because she flunked me and that was the first class that I ever failed, but after that she sat down and talked to me saying how she saw something great in me. I just have to continue to work hard and I gave her the yes ma'am, un-huh and ok shuffle. Then she inspired me, and she challenged me. From that moment on I never made lower than a B in her class. So, I guess my relationship with her is good

because she challenged me for a long time and made me become a better man.

A combination of the student's involvement, length of time in school, frequency of contact with professors, and major give students more power in their relationships with faculty. Students often use teacher conferences, personal reputations, or involvement in campus activities/organizations in order to manipulate the relationship or "make life easier." Corey states that, "I have learned that once you get the faculty and staff on your side a lot of your problems will be easy to solve."

Student Involvement

Student involvement proved to be one of the more interesting factors involved in the persistence of the subjects. Student involvement at Two Rivers College was divided into the following six categories: student initiated organizations, campus organizations, community, work/work study, academics and social. The researcher found that each of the subjects' involvement in the aforementioned categories varied according to the interests and needs of the individual subject. Each student found value in and invested a great deal of their time contributing to one or more of the six categories. Each of these students was able to find a combination of activities from the categories which fit his or her personalities and needs and enabled him or her to persist.

Dave

Dave was a sophomore English major who lived in Renner Hall. Dave was an only child raised by a single mother. His mother's motto for his education was, "Go to school or get out!" Dave was a good student in both high school and college. He was influenced to attend Two Rivers by teachers in his high school that attended Two Rivers College or another HBCU. Dave described himself in this manner, "I'm suppose...you say pretty active in school. I'm a member at large of the SGA (Student Government Association), part of the band, I tutor, and am part of the Capital City Heart Study. In between those I stay pretty busy. Every now and then I go out or something." For Dave his involvement in campus organizations such as the SGA and student initiated organizations (band) proved to be the most valuable in enriching his college experience. Dave felt that starting the school band was good for him because it helped expose him to new experiences and helped him to garner new skills. Dave acknowledged that this experience helped him in another way also. It empowered him by making him feel that this was his campus, that he was valued, and that he had the power to change things. Dave described the possibilities for himself in this manner, "Here I can do things. I can explore things and develop things on my own."

Campus organizations were also important in student involvement. In the following statement Dave explained that his involvement with and opportunity for involvement was a major reason why he remained at Two Rivers College, "I see that there is a lot to be done here. A lot that can be done here. It's allowed me to grow in the process like for instance the SGA, we just voted on a new constitution. That whole process helped me to learn how to first develop a constitution and then to persuade people."

Kurt

Kurt was a fifth year senior that graduated in May of 2002. His major was computer science. At the time of this study, Kurt had finished all of his coursework requirements and was working on his senior paper (a graduation requirement at Two Rivers College) while holding a full-time job at Two River's academic computing center. Kurt was reared in middle-class family where his mother was a teacher and his father worked on an air force base. Education was stressed by both of his parents, but he was a C student and stated that he did just enough to get by. Kurt also proved to be a goal-oriented person that is driven by the desire to succeed and make money. Involvement in campus organizations, with the exception of a Greek Fraternity, held little value for him. Work/ work-study and social aspects of campus life were the most significant to him even though he did not consider himself highly socially involved. Much of Kurt's time was devoted to work and work-study largely because he viewed it as a means to network and prepare himself for the future.

Kurt described his social life as consisting primarily of playing basketball, chess, and just hanging out/kicking it at different locations on campus. He fondly recalled playing basketball at Brown Lee Gymnasium from midnight to 3 or 4 in the morning (a Two Rivers tradition started in the early 1990's called the Midnight Leagues), hanging-out at Beard Hall, and the lunchroom. Even though Kurt stated that the lunchroom was the ideal on campus hangout spot most of his contact with other students occurred in a different manner. Kurt states, "I went to the lunchroom every now and then, but I knew most of the students or talked to most of them just passing by."

Corey

Corey was a senior Child Development major from a small town in the Delta region of the state. Corey grew up in a small home consisting of his mother, two sisters, one brother, and his grandparents. His mother worked two jobs and was only able to spend a considerable amount of time with the family on the weekends. Corey had little contact with his father while growing up. Corey had this to say about the importance of education in his household, "Education was not really stressed in our household even though we were given the opportunity to learn. Mom provided us with three choices: work, school, or join the military. I chose to go to school."

Corey attended a majority African American high school with few African American teachers. He was a C student that was into sports. Corey stated that he did just enough to stay eligible for sports in high school. Corey was heavily involved community and campus organizations while at Two Rivers College. He also took the initiative to start his own organization. Corey describes the community organization he helped found like this,

> The organization that a friend and I established was Mentor Impact. It is basically …Big Brothers and Big Sisters is more centered around elementary kids, but Mentor Impact…we set or goals to mentor high school students, so they can go mentor Jr. high students and the Jr. high can go mentor elementary. So it is sort of like…I guess you can say a chain reaction.

Starting a mentoring program was the next logical step for Corey after his involvement with two other mentoring programs. He stated, "Once I saw how important that mentorship was, I decided to take it and work with it even more."

Corey gained a great deal from being involved in both campus and community organizations. He believes that his involvement with different organizations has provided him with opportunities that he might have otherwise been denied. Corey stated that, "A lot of things that I experienced while at Two Rivers I don't think I would have ever experienced."

Renee

Renee was a sophomore Art and Psychology major from Capital City. Renee chose to live on campus despite the fact that she could have easily commuted to the college. She was raised in a middle class, two-parent household. Renee went to a predominantly African American high school in an affluent African American community. She was an excellent high school student. Renee received a full scholarship to attend Two Rivers College.

Academic, social, and campus organizations (choir) were instrumental in Renee's involvement. She stated that her main reason for attending Two Rivers was for academic reasons and not social ones. She also stated that she felt that it was all right to be lacking in the social area as long as academic involvement was strong. She attributed her attitude on academics to the influence of her mother, "That is how my mom raised me because she is a teacher. So… that is how she raised me. Academics first and all that other little stuff you don't need it, get rid of it, da dit da dit. You don't need all this other little stuff." Even though Renee was raised this way and claimed to hold these values, her actions reflected that academics was not the sole focus of her involvement.

One campus organization was of great importance to Renee. That organization was the choir. I initially met Renee at 12:00 on January 25, 2002, in Warren Hall. She had moved a couch in the Warren Hall lobby to face the door where everyone that entered to go to the bookstore, cafeteria, or game room would have to pass by her. She had placed a clear plastic five-gallon water jug on a small table next to the couch where she was sitting. She excitedly stopped everyone entering the building urging them to support "their" choir.

Each of the subject's involvement was in some way affected by two major factors. They were the campus size and Greek life. The subjects overwhelmingly viewed the small size as an advantage. They most directly correlated the campus size with the opportunity for involvement and developing relationships. Because of the size students can get involved, be seen, and have close relationships. Dave describes it in this manner, "It is like a mini-world. Especially here you can do almost anything that you want to as far as activities and being active because it is so small." Corey stated, "Because for one by Two Rivers being a small institution you get an opportunity to talk to your administrators as much as you want to. You can talk to your deans and once you do something on campus positive people seem to look out for you." Renee says she enjoys it because, "Me, personally cause I'm such a socialite. I'm glad I came to such a small campus because I'm the type of person who wants to be every organization possible."

Greek organizations also affect student involvement because they are responsible for many of the social activities such as parties and forums. The absence of any one of

these Greek organizations decreases the opportunities that students have to gather at campus social events. Being involved with a fraternity or a sorority also affects a student's opportunity to hold higher-level positions among the student body. Being a member of a Greek-letter organization gives a student power on campus in much the same way that a political party does. It divides the student body into cliques. There are those that have no desire to be in a Greek organization, members of Greek organizations, and those that want to be a part of one.

Impracticality of Transferring

The final major factor affecting the decision of students to remain at Two Rivers College until graduation was the impracticality of transferring. The consensus among the subjects was that even if they desired to leave Two Rivers College for another college it would not be worth the effort. Renee explained this best saying, "Besides the fact that I have based my academic career here and I don't feel like transferring...going through the hassle of them saying hey, that doesn't count here, that doesn't count here, and that doesn't count here would not be worth it." Kurt, Corey, Dave, and Renee were each cognizant of the fact that going from a PBC to another college would cause them to lose credits and be further away from their goal of attaining a college degree.

Latiker's Model of African American Student Persistence in a Private Black College

Figure 1*: Latiker's Model of African American Student Persistence in a PBC*

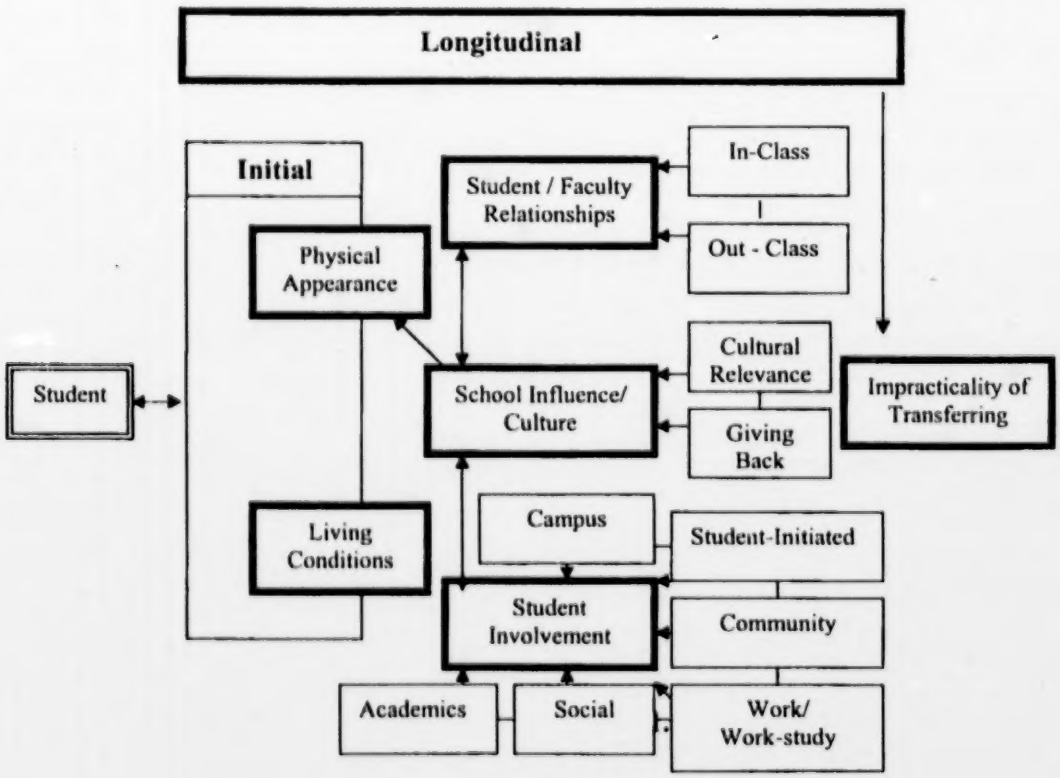

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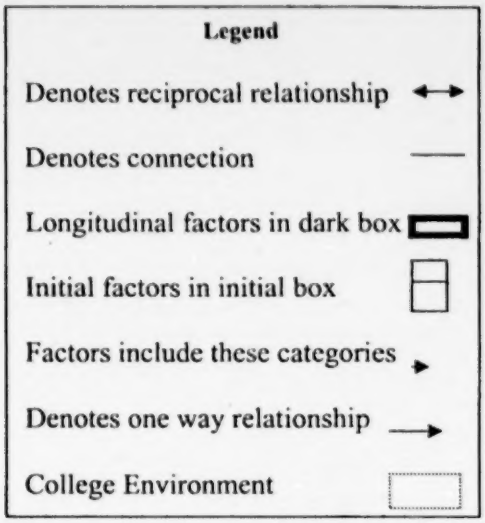
Figure 2: *Legend*



Once students enter a PBC they face an initial set of factors that may affect their likelihood to persist. They are the physical appearance of the campus and the living conditions. They may affect the student's desire to persist positively or negatively depending on the student's degree of exposure to the PBC and other types of colleges and universities. These are characterized as the initial factors because they involve the senses and have an immediate affect on the student. Upon entering the campus students are immediately able to see the campus and make judgments about its visual appeal to them. The same is true of their living conditions. They can make judgments about the condition of their dorms, rooms, and food in the cafeteria. Within Two Rivers College the first two factors, physical appearance and living conditions are often initially seen as barriers to persistence. However, they may be overcome by exposure to school influence/culture of the campus. Physical appearance and living conditions are considered to be both initial and longitudinal factors because their affect on persistence changes over time.

The longitudinal factors are student/faculty relationships, the culture of the institution, student involvement, and the impracticality of transferring. They are categorized as longitudinal because a student's perception of them develops over time and also changes over time. Each of the longitudinal factors are connected in such a manner that they may have a direct influence upon the other (meaning that student/faculty relationships, culture, and student involvement may all have a reciprocal relationship with each other).

Student/faculty relationships are divided into two categories, in-class and out of class. Faculty occupy the role of teacher while in-class. Out of class they may occupy a mentor/advisor or parental figure role. These roles also maintain a reciprocal relationship. Student/faculty relationships are affected by the frequency of contact, classification of the student, major, and student involvement.

School influence/culture is also divided into two categories. They are cultural relevance and an emphasis on giving back (responsibility of student). The cultural relevance of the institution to the student includes the orientation of the following

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categories to African American culture and history: classrooms, activities, campus environment, and community involvement. Giving back includes a student's responsibility to the college, community, and other students. It is stressed to the students by faculty, other students, and college requirements.

Student involvement is divided into six categories that students have the opportunity to participate in. They are campus organizations, student initiated organizations, work/work study, academics, social, and community. It is important to remember that each student is different and has different needs as far as involvement is concerned. Therefore, a student's degree of involvement in each category may vary. A student's degree of involvement in one category may also affect a student's involvement in another. Student involvement in one category may make up for a lack of involvement in another.

The impracticality of transferring is a factor that is directly influenced by time and the other five factors. It, however, does not maintain a reciprocal relationship with the other factors because it does not directly influence them. The impracticality of transferring does not influence student/faculty relationships, school influence/culture, student involvement, physical appearance, or the living conditions. Its relationship with the other factors can best be described in this manner, the longer students persist and the more positive student experiences are the more impractical transferring becomes for students.

Discussion, Implications, and Recommedations

The view that campus environments influence the educational experiences of college students is a consistent thread throughout research on African Americans in higher education (Davis, 1994). This, however, has not sparked a substantial amount of research on African American persistence in some areas of higher education. Dave, Kurt, Corey, and Renee were four individuals that chose to be educated in a Private Black College. Their experiences and interactions within this unique environment helped to provide a more complete view of the major factors and their affect on African American student persistence. This section begins with a discussion of the factors identified in *Latiker's Model of African American Student Persistence in a Private Black College* developed in this study. It then discusses the study's implications for higher education and concludes with recommendations for further research.

Discussion

A Southern Education Foundation (1986) report explains, "The educational goals and activities of Black students are acted out in specific social environments which affect not only their context, but their possibilities for realization as well. Actors in the setting, indeed the setting itself, can either facilitate or frustrate the efforts of Black students." (p. 77) The findings from this study suggest that African American student persistence is most greatly affected by student experiences and the interactions that occur within the Private Black College environment or are facilitated by the PBC environment. For this reason, pre-collegiate characteristics such as the academics of the student, demographics, and the financial status of the student's family were not included in *Latiker's Model of*

African American Student Persistence in a Private Black College. These factors served as the hallmark of persistence research in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but prove to be of little consequence in this study. The four participants in this study had diverse backgrounds. They represented students from both lower and middle classes, from single parent homes as well as two parent families, students educated in rural and urban areas, and students at various levels on the high school academic spectrum; yet they each persisted. None of the participants felt that their background proved to be a hindrance to their persistence, nor did they mention their background as being major factors in their decision to persist. The participants consistently spoke of their experiences after entry into college.

Pre-collegiate characteristics may not be a major factor in the persistence of African American students in PBCs because of the history and orientation of PBCs. Traditionally they have shouldered the responsibility of educating African Americans at all educational levels (Smith, 1981). They have incorporated methods of counteracting the effects of pre-collegiate characteristics into the very culture of PBCs. Professor George Neely described a similar phenomena at the HBCU, Fisk University, in this manner, "There is virtually no stigma attached to any aspect of your being under prepared, having a lack of knowledge, or poor diction...Fisk is the kind of community that allows you to get large not stay small." (Townsend, 1994, p.86) In keeping with that spirit, most PBCs use open admissions policies, provide remedial courses to a large proportion of students to supplement their high school education, and counteract the effects of background through the culture and influence of the school.

Private Black Colleges are unique educational environments largely because of their culture and the influence that they have on students. African American college students are able to see that their culture is valued because of their surroundings, activities, and interactions with others within the PBC environment. Being educated in an environment that is centered around their own culture helps to strengthen feelings of self-worth and the desire to persist. Beverly Tatum (1997) describes environments that do this as healthy for African American students. Not only do PBCs provide cultural environments that are similar to that of the students as suggested by the concept "college fit", but they also perpetuate African American culture. They do so by passing on tradition, teaching about African American history, and by exposing students to the diversity within the African American culture.

One of the major socializing agents on PBC campuses is the faculty/staff. At PBCs African American students often have more of an opportunity to develop relationships with faculty/staff. This size of these institutions is one reason for that. It allows students to have more access to their professors so that they can feel valued or feel that they are "more than just a number." Students and professors are able to frequently interact outside of the classroom because they see each other walking across the campus and professors stress that they are accessible to students as long as they are on campus. Interaction between students and faculty outside of the classroom is of the utmost importance because as much as 85% of a student's waking time is spent outside of the classroom (Patrick and Ernest Pascarella, 1994). Interaction outside of the classroom provides faculty/staff with opportunities to influence students in a variety of ways.

Being involved within campus life is also an integral part of African American student persistence. African American students feel that they have more and better

opportunities to get involved on PBCs. One would think that the small size and fewer resources of PBCs would make it more difficult for students to become involved, but this is not the case. Astin (1984) states that, "It is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment (p.303)." However, it goes far beyond just being able to identify with the environment. An environment that encourages the student to become involved is most conducive to African American student persistence. Faculty/staff influence, seeing other African American students actively participating in activities and organizations, and knowing that the educational institution values participation all work together to increase African American student involvement.

Until now, I have discussed the major factors within a Private Black College that have had the most positive overall effect on African American student persistence. The physical appearance of the campus and the living conditions of the students were the two factors that most negatively impacted persistence. These factors are linked to the financial status of the institution and its ability to afford improvements. Thompson (1973) states that one of the most commonly shared characteristics among PBCs is that they are poorly funded. This is one of the prices that these colleges pay for maintaining their independence. The absence of state funding affects the college's ability to provide some living conditions that larger better-funded institutions provide. One of the reasons that physical appearance and living conditions may not already be prevalent in African American persistence literature is that most studies are conducted at larger institutions with more extensive physical plants where the size, look of the campus, and facilities are more consistent with campuses within mainstream higher education.

There is one major difference between physical appearance and living conditions. Students' perceptions of the physical appearance can be altered without an actual change being made to the campus. A process of enculturation (time, history, and school influence/culture) may increase the appeal of the campus's appearance to African American students. Living conditions, however, can only be addressed through some type of physical change to the campus. The participants stated that the living conditions alone were not enough to make them leave, but they acknowledged that it affects students' desire to persist. The issue of living conditions must be addressed in PBCs because students' receive messages about their value and worth from living conditions just like they do from school influence/culture. It is counterproductive for PBCs to tell students that they are valued and important, while their living conditions reflect something entirely different.

Implications for Higher Education

> The very existence of a private college system testifies to the recognition that our society needs a variety of institutions to fulfill the needs of different individuals. The American educational system is not a monolith in which all institutions are invested with a homogenized sameness under centralized direction. It is rather, a mosaic in which public colleges, private colleges and religiously oriented institutions offer different paths and different educational experiences. They rightly reflect the pluralism embedded in the structure of our society. (Jordan, 1975,p.13)

The American system of higher education must address the issue of African American student persistence by examining its greatest strength, its diversity. This study shows that higher education can no longer use a "one size fits all" approach to study student persistence. If we truly desire to know what factors affect African American student persistence and how, then we must investigate African American student experiences in a variety of educational settings.

A Private Black College served as the unique educational setting in this study. The findings indicate that the PBC environment is conducive to African American students persisting largely because of their orientation towards African American culture, the influence of faculty/staff, and their ability to encourage African American students to become involved in the campus and community. This is in direct contrast to the bulk of literature on African American students in college that suggests that African Americans face culturally alienating environments, subtle as well as overt racism, and a lack of support in our higher educational system. This is why PBCs should be looked to in order to find ways to help increase African American student persistence in all of American higher education.

An important conclusion that I have drawn is that the PBC environment is not easily replicable on a large scale within Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Like PBCs, PWIs also have their own unique histories and culture that have developed in response to the needs of the majority of their students. Therefore these institutions are more oriented toward Caucasian students, making the vast majority of the images, activities, and curriculum relevant to their needs and interest. When African Americans attend PWIs they may feel that they are in a hostile environment because they do not receive the message that their history and culture are valued. African American students rarely see reflections of themselves on the walls, in the activities that are provided, or stressed throughout the college's curriculum on a large scale.

Even though the PBC educational environment is not easily replicable for the vast majority of institutions within American higher education, there are some ways to help improve African American student persistence. Colleges and universities can incorporate more images and activities that reflect African American culture into their campuses. This would help African American students feel that they are valued and do share ownership of the campus. Faculty and staff need to become more involved with African American students especially outside of the classroom. This could help strengthen student/faculty relationships by showing African American students that they are valued, providing more opportunities for mentoring, and increasing African American students' effort in the classroom. Colleges and universities must also find ways of encouraging African American students to become involved in campus life. This would strengthen student ties to the campus, thereby increasing their likelihood to persist.

There are some specific steps that colleges and universities could take to help incorporate African American culture, increase faculty/staff interaction with African American students, and encourage African American student involvement. The following are some suggestions:

- Extend the freshmen orientation process by incorporating a seminar or class where students are taught how to interact with faculty, the benefits of interacting with faculty, the history of the college, and encouraged to join organizations and activities.

- Encourage faculty/staff (regardless of race) to participate in workshops or open discussions with African American students that relate to classes or issues of African American student concern.
- Create cultural centers on campuses with ties to the surrounding community that will provide a reference point for African American student campus involvement and service to the surrounding community.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study examined African American student persistence in a Private Black College from the perspective of the African American student. Research on African American student persistence could be furthered by replicating this study using a multisite design that examines African American student perspectives in a number of PBCs. This research could also be continued by examining the perspectives of faculty/staff and administration as well as African American students. African American student persistence research could also be extended to compare African American student perspectives in Private Black Colleges and Historically Black Universities.

It is important to note that student persistence is a major concern in all of higher education, regardless of race/ethnicity of the student or the orientation of the college/university. Studies, such as this one, need to be conducted on a variety of racial/ethnic groups and religious affiliated groups in a number of higher educational settings. Hispanic student persistence in Predominantly Hispanic Serving Institutions, Native American student persistence in Tribal Colleges, and the persistence of religious affiliated groups, such as Catholics and Mormons, in institutions oriented around their cultures is also direly needed.

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